
Basketball Diplomacy in Africa: An Oral History Project with FIBA Foundation

Transcript: Kevin Bahun-Wilson

Conducted by Lindsay S. Krasnoff

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The FIBA Foundation is the social and legacy arm of FIBA that addresses the role of sports and particularly basketball in society, preserving and promoting basketball's values and its cultural heritage. The FIBA Foundation believes that basketball has the power to empower, educate and inspire youth and facilitates this by implementing Basketball For Good projects around the world. In our eyes, all actors initiating positive change in communities through basketball are part of the Basketball For Good family.

The following interviews all feature Basketball For Good advocates in Africa and show the heart and soul of the Basketball For Good Family.

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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What is your name, age and background? And how did you embark on the world of basketball?
What has been your personal journey, through the sport?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

My name is Kevin Bahun-Wilson. I am 28. I discovered basketball around the age of 10, through DVDs named the AND 1 streetball mixtapes. I joined a team by the age of 11, simply because my mother thought it was too cold to play outdoor sports (soccer/football) during the winter. And from that point on, it was just a love story.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so, where were you growing up, when this was happening?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

So, I grew up in a small town called Ferney-Voltaire in France, right next to Geneva, so right on the border. I used to play basketball on a Swiss team, Meyrin Basket. Then when I was 16 years old, I moved to Georgia for about seven months, to play basketball there as well.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And what was basketball like at that time, when you were growing up in that particular region?
You know it varies completely.

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

That's true. So, in Europe, the main sport is soccer, you know football, but it was also a time when the NBA culture was expanding beyond its original borders thanks to the internet era. It was easy to watch highlights on YouTube or on the NBA website.

However, from a cultural standpoint, playing basketball in Europe and in the US is totally different. In Europe, you end up playing with many players of African origin, you bond because of basketball and our mutual cultural backgrounds. In the US, it was a completely different experience.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So then what does basketball mean to you? It sounds like it helped to serve as a kind of an icebreaker -- a way to connect with others who you encountered, whether in Europe, or particularly as you just described, your experience in Georgia.

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

I think basketball allows you to connect with different cultures. In Europe, I had teammates of Italian and Portuguese origin. When I was in the US, I met people from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and so on and so forth. So being able to play basketball puts you in a melting pot situation, where you have to mix and discover various cultures. That was great and a really humbling experience.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Transitioning a little bit, how did you first become involved with basketball in Africa? And perhaps this is also a good way to segment into: what is AfroBallers? And how did you come up with that concept?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

Basketball in Africa? My parents have made sure that we travel to Africa from a young age. So pretty much every other summer, from the time I was a boy, I was spending at least a month in Togo and Benin, and Ghana. So, I've always been in touch with the people. And you know, when I was between 14 to 16 years old, basketball was a big part of my life. It didn't matter whether I was going to Benin, Togo, or Ghana, I had to play basketball. I had to find places to play, and to be honest, I was always amazed with the talent on the Continent. Even though they didn't have proper training, they were surprising me in many different ways, and they were really strong and exceptionally athletic. All this somehow inspired the creation of AfroBallers.

But the trigger point is due to a trip to Ghana in 2019. I visited my dad, who's based in Ghana. I spent two months there in November and December. While there, I realized the influence of social media in people's lives. Everybody was interacting, thanks to Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. And at the time, many social media news platforms related to sports were rising. It was also when Giannis, Embiid and Siakam's (all players with direct ties to Africa) impact on the NBA truly grew.

This got me wondering: "Why is there no platform, no website, no social media platform for African athletes, when we have such a rich culture? This has to be expanded to the world." And that's really how the idea for AfroBallers came to my mind.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And why did you decide to do AfroBallers in English, versus en français?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

The main language in the sports space is English. Doing AfroBallers in English felt like it would allow us to reach more sports fans, at a faster rate. However, we have had discussions about doing it in French, as a vast part of the African Continent is Francophone.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In your opinion, how has your understanding of the intersection of basketball and diplomacy changed as a result of your experience? Or as a result of thinking through our questions today?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

I think sports and diplomacy is important for Africa. Where we are right now on the Continent, it is hard to create any infrastructure, without any political relationships in the countries.

The Kigali Arena, where the BAL (Basketball Africa League) was held for two weeks, is the product of a discussion between Masai Ujiri and President Kagame. This arena is now being used for more than just the BAL. The AfroBasket, local tournaments and local events all take place at this location. I truly believe that one of the best ways to create infrastructures in the country, is to somehow, some way, find ways to incorporate sports goals into the governmental goals.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So really kind of this perspective, of sport being a tool that cuts across different areas, diplomacy, development, economic development, and so forth?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

Exactly. When you think about 2019, when Mali finished second at the Under 19 World Cup. That was a prime example of what kind of investment needs to be done in the African Continent. Because most of the prospects that played for that team at the time, played either in France, or they played in the US. Can you imagine if the local talents had access to the same infrastructures and experienced trainers?

Some of these Malian talents will probably make it professional in some of the world's biggest leagues. In fact, some Malian talents are now playing in Europe, it is the result of a lot of former Mali athletes that went abroad and created a pipeline, to help those prospects go to the US, and get the required training.

But now it's a matter of using those same individuals, and the relationships that they have, to create local infrastructures. To grow the game locally, and, you know, help the development of the Country. Because the better the level of talent is, the better the local leagues will be, and the more sponsors and partners will be willing to invest in the sport. That will create more jobs and help the economy of the country, and the development of the leagues.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And so thinking about this from a slightly different angle, how does basketball diplomacy fit into your work developing sport, as a part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, right? What is that intersection, in your mind, or in your work?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

With AfroBallers, we aim to expand and amplify the narratives of what's happening on the Continent and the people of the diaspora. There are many storylines.

In terms of UN Sustainable Development Goals, we are expanding our coverage on women's sports, through our work. We're trying to showcase local players that are based on the Continent.

African Professional basketball players also come back, and invest back in their community. They give back, they create foundations, they create hospitals. They create schools. They provide water purifying systems.

They've used basketball as a tool to provide education, access to health centres and more. They are giving back. In the sense of the SD goals, it's the matter of being able to use basketball for a greater purpose to reach the goals.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

To what extent can Basketball for Good programs help delineate between sport development, you know development of say basketballers, and the skills, and infrastructure that they need? Versus sport for development, which gets a little different?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

Okay, so just to clarify. When you're talking about Basketball for Good, are you talking about the FIBA initiatives?

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Yes.

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

Okay. Basketball for Good initiatives, they've been created, in a sense, to act on the precise case. So most of the time, they cover a specific SDG goal. So it can be health, it can be the economy, it can be gender inequality. And then they work with the local federations, to improve the condition that they would focus on.

Sport development is focused on growing and promoting a specific sports activity in a community. However, sport development depends largely on partnerships and networking with community groups, service providers, national governing bodies, voluntary groups and so on and so forth.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

I'd like to drill down a little bit, since you were returning to Africa every year, over a long period of time. Could you tell the audience a little bit about the differences in terms of how basketball was perceived? Or its perception between Togo, versus Benin and Ghana? I think, right, they are the three that you're most familiar with?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

Basketball is not taken seriously enough in those countries. It's just a way to get your energy out. There are no academies like the ones you see in Europe or the US. They believe there is no opportunity in basketball. However, Benin Republic is making changes, they now have professional teams.

They are investing a bit more in infrastructures, as well. And I think with the BAL, and also the FIBA tournaments, there's a clear route that can be created to become a professional player. It's also a matter of the governments, and the people in charge, to create that awareness within the people. But overall, basketball has never been perceived as a potential real route to get to education. Or to even create a real revenue stream.

A lot of people in Africa are poor. So they've got to focus on getting their day to day money. Rather than invest in a long-term goal like basketball, or focus on getting an education. They've got to worry about surviving on a daily basis.

However, the landscape is slowly changing. I know some people are creating basketball academies in Ghana. In Togo, there's a junior league that's being developed and It is very competitive. They've done a lot of great work, to engage with the whole country. Not only like one location, but they've engaged with the whole country. In Benin Republic, there's a lot of changes that are happening as well. So slowly mentalities are changing. And the sport will be perceived in a better light. So I can't wait to see what it's going to look like, when it matures even more.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And just to clarify. You said that there has been the development of professional leagues in both Togo and Benin, but not Ghana?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

Basketball in Benin Republic is now professional, a law proposed by Benin President Patrice Talon has requested that all clubs operate as companies. It now allows the national championship to develop, in particular, by attracting sponsors.

Angola has a few professional teams. As an example, you can think about Petro de Luanda, who was a team that participated in the BAL. The level of their local players was amazing. Because those guys, they are able to focus on basketball 24/7. And now in Benin Republic, we should soon be able to do the same.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What impact, in your perspective, do you think BAL (with the NBA investment behind it and with the FIBA investment, and both dedication to it) will have on this kind of basketball, in these three countries that we're talking about? And then its subsequent use, perhaps in sports diplomacy?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

The NBA investment shows you that the NBA is really serious about growing the sports industry on the Continent and creating real opportunities for the people and being a major actor on the growth of jobs related to sports. This investment should motivate countries to create real opportunities through basketball.

If implemented in a strategic and successful way, it will create an increase in revenue, for the involved cities, and give opportunities to children to get access to education thanks to basketball academies. This investment will impact the life of many on the long haul.

In terms of professional sports, especially in the BAL, the winner receives a package that's being invested into the club. So they can invest more into their facilities and training. In the long term, these investments will help develop the basketball level of these clubs, and I truly think that this will eventually lead to having a BAL player join the NBA. Because I know this is going to happen at one point.

From a marketing standpoint, it is important to make an effort to broadcast games to as many places as possible. This year, the BAL has been broadcasted in 215 nations and territories, in 15 languages. That is a great step ahead. I believe it will keep on developing.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So we've been talking about this concept of basketball diplomacy. The intersection of communication, representation, and negotiation in and around the basketball court. And certainly with AfroBallers, you're working very squarely on the communications side. And helping to communicate the story. But also you know, you're helping to represent and negotiate a variety of the audience's perceptions and reactions, toward basketball in Africa. And so, I'm really keen to ask, from your perspective, what do you see as good examples of basketball diplomacy?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

I think the work of Masai Ujiri, Amadou Gallo Fall, or even more recently Gorgui Dieng, are great examples of sports diplomacy. They've used their resources to give back and grow the game.

When you think about the SEED project, they have helped many individuals get access to an education thanks to their basketball prowess. At the end, only a very few end up as professional players, but the others end up with great jobs, and university diplomas. The beautiful part about this is that it creates different role models for the younger generation, and so they know that you can have a great career and it does not have to be related to basketball at all.

Also, many NBA players like Gorgui Dieng (who is a SEED alumni) come back to the Continent and help the next generation, through their foundations and sometimes their own basketball academies. When Precious Achiuwa (Former Giants of Africa camp Alumni), who now plays for the Miami Heat comes back, and invests in local communities in Nigeria, you know that's another success story. Thanks to platforms like SEED, and Giants of Africa, these players have been exposed to greater opportunities, but it gets better when they are able to create more opportunities for other people. This way, the loop will keep on growing.

In my opinion, these are great examples of sports diplomacy.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And is it fair to say that people like Masai, or Amadou, or Precious, or Gorgui, or Joel Embiid, are these the same people who are inspiring kids into basketball, in different parts of Africa? Or are they being inspired by different figures?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

So what you've mentioned is interesting. Because I do think that they inspire a lot of people, on the Continent for sure. But I think they will be more inspired by the people in the local leagues.

Because I was at the BAL, and I saw the engagement from people from Angola, Egypt and Tunisia. They had such a strong fan base. I'm pretty sure that there are a lot of kids that are watching these players, and want to be like them. So, it's also a matter of trying to really elevate the local storylines and showcasing them to the world, because I think those kids are actually looking up more to who is around them, rather than people in the NBA. I am pretty sure there are parts in Africa where Giannis and Joel Embiid can walk around, and they will not be recognized.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Well so, this gets to the question of how are people consuming basketball? You mentioned at the start social media, and certainly there's platforms like AfroBallers. But certainly as you just mentioned, where there's local stories, especially when there's stronger teams involved there... Yeah, so how are people consuming basketball?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

I believe a vast majority of basketball is now being consumed through social media and live streams.

Social media is a very powerful tool to reach out to the youth. We are able to get so many stories out there (local and international ones), thanks to social media. This is phenomenal. I think as long as you have access to a phone, and internet, you can be fine now.

There is definitely television too. During my last stay in Senegal, I've witnessed people gathering outside a restaurant or a shop, just to watch a game.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

So are people learning about different parts of Africa, or interacting? What are the intra-African exchanges, and communications going on, in terms of using basketball as a prism, to learn more about each other? Is that happening, or not quite yet?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

So based on my interactions that I'm having through the platform of AfroBallers, I can see that sports is digested and perceived in different ways, in different countries in Africa.

So, some countries, they take it more seriously, like people in Senegal and Mali, Congo. I mean they send you, like a lot of videos, because they want to be seen. But people from Tanzania, or Zambia, they don't really send anything. It almost feels like they don't have much hope in making it.

So there definitely is a difference in the way basketball is digested in various parts. In my opinion, I think it's all related to role models. When you think about Congo, you have many players that came from Congo that are in the NBA today. There are many Senegalese that made

it to the NBA. There are many Malian players that made it to the NBA. So those guys have definitely influenced the growth of the game, in their local countries. But someone from Tanzania, or Zambia, or one of those countries, they don't really have role models like that.

The truth is, there are players from those origins that play basketball, and that made it professional in other countries. If you can find ways to expand these storylines, and tell them what they've done, or involve these athletes to create more initiatives, in their own countries, they can inspire the next generation to push the sport locally, further than they could.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Referring back to some of the things you've mentioned earlier in our interview, and just kind of asking you to drill down a little bit more. We've talked a lot, about a lot of the opportunities that basketball offers. But what are some of the challenges for basketball, and Basketball for Good, and basketball diplomacy in Africa? Aside from as you've just mentioned, it's not taken terribly seriously, in certain countries.

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

You know, when you want to play soccer/football, or rugby, you don't need a basket. This is the biggest challenge with basketball. There is a lack of infrastructures to be able to create local courts. This way, children can start playing, and you know, practicing by themselves. I think that's the biggest challenge of playing the game in Africa. Because football is so easy to practice, you can literally create a ball out of clothes, put two rocks to delineate the goals, and you can play soccer.

Rugby, which is actually growing at a strong rate in Africa, is also easy to learn too. All you need is a ball, a few friends, and you can teach yourself how to play.

However, in basketball, you always need the rim to be able to practice your shot, your layup, and so on and so forth. So I think the biggest challenge is the lack of basketball infrastructures, in Africa, that are accessible to everybody.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Following this notion, how does basketball play a role in creating identities within Africa? But also connected to the diaspora, whether in France, other parts of Europe, the UK? The US might be a little different, I'm not sure of their perspective.

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

Players like Sekou Doumbouya, or Hamidou Diallo who grew up in France and the States, respectively, recently had basketball camps in Guinea. These are children of the diaspora coming to give back to the motherland.

The connection between Africa and its diaspora is key. Most parents have made a sacrifice, when coming to Europe or North America for their children to have access to a better education and greater opportunities. I think there are a lot of athletes from the diaspora that realize that. And they want to give back, and They want to be involved in giving back.

Also, more and more African-American athletes, which are also part of the diaspora, are coming to Africa to give back and invest in solutions that drastically help the country. Some of them do it through basketball, others just do it on their own. Truth be told, some of the stories are not even known by anyone.

On a more local level, players like Joel Embiid have always been involved in initiatives from the NBA in Africa. And that is seriously not to be taken lightly, because that shows he's not forgetting where he's from. It shows that he's always willing to give back, and be a role model for the next generation.

I think most people understand their role in society, and somehow it involves giving back. People from the diaspora may make it their mission to do so.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In what ways does basketball afford opportunities for women in Africa? Kind of thinking through this prism of SDG 5, working towards greater gender equity or equality. Certainly in certain countries, women's basketball does quite well. In other countries, not quite so much. So in your experience, and from your perspective, how do you view this question?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

I think there are many women from the Continent that can make it as professionals in basketball. There's more and more effort to really create initiatives for women and fight against gender inequality.

In terms of competitions, the AfroBasket women is amazing, and it is a very competitive tournament. They organize it at different age groups from the U16 level, and it truly showcases the talent that there is on the Continent.

In terms of local development, in Senegal, I have seen many young females playing from the age of 12 or 13 years old. So, this leads me to believe that on the Continent, there's been a great effort to expose the game to everybody. Now, I think it's a matter of us being able to get those stories out there.

Also, there are a lot of women coaches as well, some of them coach male teams, and they do an amazing job.

So women are really skilled, but there's a lack of coverage on their achievements.

Since we are talking about women, I want to share this story; Monny Niamké, she has an academy in Ivory Coast. So when she was about 13 years old, some scouts found her and took her to France. She attended one of the top French basketball programs. She then played college basketball for Louisville, and once she graduated, became a professional basketball player in France for a bit, and then she decided to retire in her early 20s. She stopped to focus on creating

her basketball academy in Ivory Coast. From this academy, which she launched about three to four years ago, a few of the players are now labelled as “NBA prospects.” She's also helping girls obtain scholarships.

She's a champion of Africa. She left, came back, and now she's giving back, to help the next generation.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Is there anything else that you would like to add to the conversation, about basketball's use as a tool for good?

Kevin Bahun-Wilson

I just want to highlight this story of Mamadi Diakite, who now plays for the Milwaukee Bucks. He was found on Facebook, a social media site. This allowed him to go to the US, and obtain a scholarship to attend UVA (University of Virginia). In today's era, many talents can be found on Instagram or Twitter. Social media is a powerful tool. The digitalization of media, in general, is really helping the Continent, and truly allows us to fast track a lot of talents. It is important that we use what's available to us. And we maximize it to the most, to create better opportunities, for the people on the Continent.

END

Interview with Kevin Bahun-Wilson

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